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Manuela Solis Sager and Emma Tenayuca: A Tribute

Roberto Calderon
University of North Texas, roberto.calderon@unt.edu

Emilio Zamora
University of Texas at Austin, e.zamora@austin.utexas.edu

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Roberto R. CALDERÓN and Emilio ZAMORA

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One of the most memorable highlights of the annual conferences of the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS) has been the formal recognition of such scholars as Américo Paredes, Ernesto Galarza, Carey McWilliams, and Julian Samora. In recognizing and honoring the accomplishments and contributions of such men, NACS has also paid tribute to the purpose and will that guided their scholarly and political contributions to Mexican people.

The 1984 NACS conference extended this tradition by honoring Manuela Solis Sager and Emma Tenayuca, labor activists who organized and led Mexican workers' movements in Texas during the 1930s.[1] As such, NACS emphasized the key role of women in our history of struggle and underscored the need actively and effectively to acknowledge this fact in our classrooms and in our research. This emphasis was possible due to the daring commitment and unswerving dedication that Solis Sager and Tenayuca demonstrated to our community of Mexican workers. They were also the first women to be thus honored and recognized by NACS since its inception twelve years ago.

Manuela's and Emma's intellectual formation was tied to important developments that the Mexican community of South Texas shared with other communities in the Southwest and with the greater societies of Mexico and the United States. Their families nurtured the pride, love, and concern that conditioned their specific ex-

periences as individuals and as Mexicans during the early decades of this century. This is evident when they speak.

Both Solis Sager and Tenayuca credit their relatives for inspiring in their minds and sensibilities the ideas and concerns they would later elaborate on behalf of the Mexican worker in Texas. Moreover, self-help, cooperative, and protest activity in Mexican communities influenced the cultural milieu and political environment around them. Political and cultural experiences with Mexico and conditions of discrimination and inequality in the United States reinforced a national and working-class identity which they shared. Their memories are clear on this.

A short note on the conditions that gave rise to Mexican labor activity during the 1930s is in order. The first three decades of the twentieth century registered the dramatic rise and urbanization of the Mexican population, in part the result of immigration from Mexico. By 1930, approximately 40 percent of the total Mexican population lived in Texas and 30 percent in California.

The significant expansion of the U.S. national economy, particularly evident in the industrial development of the Southwest, stimulated this growth and concentration. Discrimination against Mexican workers, however, denied them fair wages and occupations other than laborers. The following illustrates this structural condition in 1930: 41 percent of the Mexican work force labored in agriculture; 11 percent in transportation; 3 percent in mining; 23 percent in manufacturing; and 10 percent in domestic and personal service. That is, 88 percent of all Mexican workers in the United States were employed in these low-paying and low-status occupations.

The participation of Mexican women in the wage labor ranks increased noticeably. Yet, they generally assumed even lower-paying, segregated positions that represented extensions of housework. In 1930, 20 percent of Mexicana workers were farm laborers; 45 percent were domestic and personal service workers; about 5 percent were saleswomen; and the remainder worked in textiles, food processing, and packing industries.

As in earlier periods, opposition to discrimination and inequality gave rise to increased labor organizing and strike activity among Mexicans throughout the United States. Independent Mexican workers' organizations sought affiliation with national labor unions. They were welcomed by the more progressive labor federa-

tions such as the Workers' Alliance of America and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). Although precise Mexican membership figures are not yet available, Mexican participation in these progressive labor groups registered more significant increases than in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Consequently, Mexican workers' organizations were prominent in the important political challenge led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) against the exclusive, craft-oriented AFL. Significantly, the Mexican labor movement of the 1930s was also characterized as never before by increased numbers of Mexicana workers. Women such as Manuela and Emma assumed key leadership positions in this historic struggle.

Manuela's long history as an activist began in Laredo during 1932 and 1933, when she helped organize unions and strikes among garment and agricultural workers. By 1934, she had attracted the respect and admiration of fellow agricultural workers sufficiently to be awarded by Asociacion de Jornaleros a year-long scholarship to attend a highly respected leftist labor school in Mexico City, the Universidad Obrera. Upon her return to Laredo, she joined her husband, James Sager, and other Laredo unionists in consolidating local efforts into a statewide Mexican Labor movement. This resulted in a statewide conference held in 1935 at Corpus Christi that attracted delegates representing numerous Mexican community organizations including labor unions and other community collectivities.

The Corpus Christi conference established the South Texas Agricultural Workers' Union (STAWU), which was to coordinate organizing work among Mexican workers, particularly field and packing shed workers. Manuela and James were appointed official organizers for the STAWU. The decision by the STAWU to assign Manuela and James to organize in the Rio Grande Valley indicates the respect their ability and dedication had earned. The area was known as one of the most difficult places to organize, principally because of strong anti-Mexican and anti-uinion sentiments held by growers, packing shed owners, and law enforcement officials.

Despite strong opposition that included violent union busting tactics, Manuela and James managed to assist workers in organizing several Mexican unions with a total membership of over 1,000 field and packing shed workers. Recalcitrant bosses, however, made it

almost impossible to translate labor organizing success into gains at the workplace. Manuela and James, having considered the situation, decided to join other organizers from throughout the state at San Antonio, where the possibility of realizing a major Mexican labor victory seemed tenable.

Manuela and James became an integral part of a veritable labor upheaval among Mexican pecan shellers, the majority of whom were women. They immediately joined ranks with union members and popular, effective leaders, such as Emma Tenayuca, with whom they had maintained direct communication since the early 1930s. Since Emma was so intimately tied to these early labor movements, it is impossible to speak about one without the other.

Emma joined the labor movement at the age of sixteen when she read about the 1932 and 1933 strikes against the Finck Cigar Company of San Antonio. She walked the picket line and subsequently joined the strikers in jail. During 1934 and 1935, Emma was also prominent in the formation of two locals of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. By 1937, she had become a member of the Executive Committee of the Workers' Alliance of America, a national federation of unemployed workers' organizations. She had also assumed the position of general secretary of at least ten Alliance chapters in San Antonio. Many of the Alliance members were affiliated with local unions of cigar, garment, and pecan shelling workers.

When at the end of January, 1938, approximately 2,000 pecan shelling workers decided to strike against the local industry, they asked Emma to act as their strike representative. As a result, her participation increased and her popularity soared to the extent that by the time Manuela and James arrived in San Antonio, Emma had become one of the most respected and dedicated unionists in San Antonio. It was at this time that she earned the name of "La Pasionaria."

Strikers were teargassed on at least six occasions, as about 150 San Antonio city police officers were deployed to prevent the strike from being thoroughly effective. Over a thousand strikers were eventually jailed and sent to both the city and county penal facilities. Trivial and even ludicrous charges such as obstructing the sidewalk were trumped up to arrest strikers. Repression and intimidation were intended to instill fear in pecan shelling workers and thus keep them

from joining in the work stoppage. These tactics were only partly successful. From six to eight thousand pecan shellers, most of them women, did heed the strike call. Soup kitchens were established, and thousands received their meals there. The Texas Women's International League for Peace and Freedom assisted in the operation of the soup kitchens and extended additional help in other areas. Had it not been for threats hanging over their head, numerous Mexican-owned and-operated business also would probably have offered significant assistance. City politics allegedly promised they would find cause to shut down establishments known to render assistance to the strikers.

The Texas Industrial Commission began a series of hearings into the strikers' grievances. The governor of the state intervened and attempted to persuade the pecan shelling industry to arbitrate. The industry finally joined the bargaining table and agreed on a settlement that ostensibly favored the workers' demands.

The strike, while restoring wages to pre-strike levels, saw its nominal gains whittled away a few months later when the industry remechanized.[2] Thousands of pecan shellers were displaced, and only about a thousand youthful employees were retained in the city's entire pecan shelling industry. In the meantime, just as the Depression seemed to be easing up on Mexican workers, war loomed large on the horizon, spelling a hiatus for Mexican participation in the Texas labor movement.

The leadership and membership of the strike and pecan shellers' unions consisted mainly of women. The Comisión Pro-Conferencia had three members, two of them women, Manuela Solis Sager and Juana Sanchez. And two of the three members of the Strike Committee were women, Emma Tenayuca and Minnie Rendón. Thus, four out of six major strike leaders were women in the front lines working directly with the rank and file.

After the victorious strike and abrogated settlement, both Emma and Manuela maintained a political course that awaits a more deliberate and detailed examination than this short note can accommodate. Some observations, however, should be made. In 1939, Emma assumed the position of chair of the Texas Communist Party. In the same year she also co-authored what is still the most lucid and accurate analysis of Mexican people ever produced by a Com-

munist party representative. Her effectiveness and popularity as a Mexicana labor leader often made her the focal point of anti-union and anti-Mexican hysteria, which eventually forced her to leave Texas to ensure her safety and economic well-being. Years later, she returned to San Antonio as a certified teacher and taught until her recent retirement. She still substitutes as a teacher occasionally.

Manuela, on the other hand, remained with her husband in San Antonio, where she has continued her involvement in progressive causes related to the Chicano movement, the women's movement, immigrant rights, electoral politics, and opposition to U.S. interventionist foreign policy. She has received numerous awards of recognition, including the one that she and Emma received from the National Association for Chicano Studies.

Both women are an inspiration and no doubt will continue to provide examples of courage, dedication, and purpose. As Mexicans, their history of involvement and accomplishment underscores the struggle and the search for justice and equality among our people. Upon listening to Manuela's and Emma's presentations, the NACS conference participants enthusiastically upheld two things. On the one hand, they made evident the still vital example established by Manuela and Emma, and, on the other hand, they confirmed the wisdom in honoring them. The following is the text of the presentations they made during the 1984 NACS conference.

Manuela Solis Sager

Voy a leerles algo en español porque me parece que es la lengua mía y quisiera dejar un mensaje a ustedes y les voy a tener que leer porque estoy muy nerviosa y *excited* con todo esto.

"El mensaje que debemos dejar con los educadores es muy simple. Al investigar la clase obrera mexicana hay que estudiarnos como lo que somos, *obreros*, y al estudiar a los obreros hay que entender nuestras luchas contra el imperialismo, nuestras luchas contra las industrias, nuestras luchas contra las universidades y en las áreas agrícolas. Pero al estudiar también hay que participar en esas luchas—no se debe estudiarlas solamente."

Fuera con Reagan en el '84! Abajo con la intervención imperialista en Centroamérica! Y empleos para todos nosotros y paz.

Manuela Solis Sager, 1937, photo taken during organizing efforts for UCAPAWA in the Harlingen, Texas area, courtesy of M.S. Sager.

También quiero decirle algo a la mujer mexicana y a la mujer en general. Esto no lo escribí, lo estoy diciendo de mi corazón. Esto quiero decirles a ustedes—que así como nosotros luchamos, ustedes tienen que seguir esta lucha y seguir adelante y ayudarnos porque nosotros....Yo ya tengo, voy a cumplir 73 años el 29 de abril y estoy en la lucha desde hace más de cincuenta años y quisiera que cada uno do nosotros, siguiéramos adelante sobre ese mismo tema y ayudar a la clase trabajodora, a las luchas del pueblo trabajador!

Emma Tenayuca, 1937, photo taken at Bexar County Jail after an arrest for protesting worker cuts in the rolls of the Works Progress Administration, courtesy of E. Tenayuca and Tom Shelton.

Emma Tenayuca

The first thing I would like to do is thank you very, very much. During the thirties when I was working in San Antonio I never attached any importance to my work. I never kept newspaper clippings. Actually, I was too busy organizing and working.

I was born in San Antonio, and on my mother's side of the family I am a descendant of Spaniards who came to Texas and settled in one

of the colonies on the Louisiana border. There was a mission established there. On my father's side, we never claimed anything but Indian blood, and so throughout my life I didn't have a fashionable Spanish name like García or Sánchez, I carried an Indian name. And I was very, very conscious of that. It was this historical background and my grandparents' attitude which formed my ideas and actually gave me the courage later to undertake the type of work I did in San Antonio. I had wonderful parents and wonderful grandparents.

I remember since I was about five watching the Battle of Flowers parade in front of Santa Rosa Hospital, right in front of the Plaza del Zacate. I also remember, and I was quite young, the election of Ma Ferguson. Here was the occasion for quite a discussion in my family between my grandfather and my mother's uncles. My father had voted for Jim Ferguson, even though Ferguson had been forced out or impeached for having taken some money from the University of Texas. My parents, my grandfather, and his family voted for Ma Ferguson and the reason for that was because she had stood up against the Ku Klux Klan in Texas.

I have a vision right now, a memory comes back to me of hooded figures. I also remember one particular circular, and it read "one hundred percent White Protestant Americans." That left me out. I was a Catholic and also I was a Mestiza, a mixture of Indian and Spanish. During the time I was growing up, it was very difficult to ignore the conditions in San Antonio. Ours was a close-knit family, and I didn't remember any discrimination, actually, until I started school. A lot of people found out that it was hard to push me around. But during the time that I was growing up here in San Antonio, my home, I had deep roots there and I felt a strong attachment with the past. I went to the mission when I was quite young. I remember we used to hold confessions on the eighth of December, which is the day of Our Immaculate Conception. I remember kicking up the dust and discovering my first Indian arrow, and that of course excited my imagination. My father taught me to fish in the San Antonio River, and it was that river that almost brought about my drowning. I was pulled out of that river with water rushing out of my nose and my mouth. I never learned to swim after that.

I witnessed a lot of discussion on topics such as Carranza and the Cristero Movement. I could not help but be impressed by the discus-

sions inside of my family, my family circle. Also, the Plaza del Zacate was the type of place where everyone went on Saturdays and Sundays to hold discussions. If you went there you could find a minister preaching. You could also find revolutionists from Mexico holding discussions. I was exposed to all of this. I was also exposed to the nature of politics and to the form of corruption. I have mentioned this to some of you whom I know. I remember as a youngster attending a political rally with my father. Sandwiches were distributed and inside the sandwich was a five-dollar bill. I didn't get one, neither did my father. I would like you to know that.

Let me give you an idea of what it meant to be a Mexican in San Antonio. There were no bus drivers that were Mexicans when I was growing up. The only Mexican workers employed by the City Public Service and the Water Board were laborers, ditch diggers. I remember they used to take the leaves from the pecan trees and they would put them on their heads in order to go out and dig ditches. I came into contact with many, many families who had grievances, who had not been paid. I was perhaps eight or nine years old at the time. On one occasion while at the Plaza with my grandfather there was a family of poor migrant workers who came and a collection was made for them. I learned that while the family had harvested a crop, the farm owner who lived somewhere in the Rio Grande Valley had awakened the family at two or three in the morning, and he and his son ran the family from the land with shotguns. I remember this discussion at the Plaza on a Saturday and they decided to go down to the Mexican Consul and place charges against the farmer. People from the Plaza accompanied the family to the Mexican Consul. It turned out that the family was Texas-born. This made quite an impression on me as a seventeen-year-old, a recent graduate from high school.

One of the first groups of organized workers that I remember were women and it is with them that we saw the beginning of the breakup of the type of political organization that existed in San Antonio. And I saw those women herded and taken to jail. The second time that happened, I went to jail with them. These were the Finck Cigar workers on strike. In both the Finck Cigar and pecan shelling strikes there was a desire to keep the Mexican population, the Mexican workers, as a reserve labor pool which could be used in case of strikes. There was poverty everywhere.

My city enjoyed the dubious reputation of having one of the highest tuberculosis rates in the country. My San Antonio also had the reputation of having one of the highest infant mortality rates. It was these things and also the fact that I had a grandfather who lost his money when the banks were closed in 1932 that made a deep impression on me. I think it was the combination of being a Texan, being a Mexican, and being more Indian than Spanish that propelled me to take action. I don't think I ever thought in terms of fear. If I had, I think I would have stayed home.

We had demonstrations of 10,000 unemployed workers demanding employment. We visited the mayor's office. We staged a strike at City Hall, and it was there that I was arrested. I went to jail many times. A nun friend used to write to me and tell me, "Emma, I have to read the papers to see whether you are in or out of jail."

I believe that what was done there and what had to be done was confronting the power structure. It was the struggles of the Workers' Alliance, the bringing in the people of mutual aid organizations, some of whom had been anarchists. I read all about the Wobblies and in my mind I also became an anarchist.

I had the idea of actually beginning with the Finck Cigar strike, of actually attacking the power structure, but at the same time doing it in such a manner that we did not get beaten up. We didn't go to jail too often you see. It was much easier for twenty or thirty of us to go to jail for three days or seventy-two hours. It was easier doing that than to fight. And we had many demonstrations in San Antonio. We have now a COPS (Citizens Organized for Public Service) organization, and I assure you that it is one of the most democratic and progressive organizations. And a very active organization too.

So in giving thanks I am thinking of the Finck Cigar strikers. I'm also thinking of the garment workers who went to jail and whose strikes were broken. I'm thinking also of men such as Maury Maverick, Sr., of San Antonio. I'm also thinking of the then Texas assistant attorney general, Everett Looney, who came to San Antonio and defended me on a charge of inciting to riot and therefore I was able to spend my twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-third birthdays out of jail. I thank you very much.

NOTES

1. The NACS conference program honoring Manuela and Emma was sponsored by the Chicano Studies Research Center and organized by the authors of this note. The accompanying reception was sponsored by the Center for Mexican American Studies, The University of Texas, Austin, and the Mexican American Chamber of Commerce, Austin, Texas. The program included a slide presentation on the condition of Mexican workers and the history of Mexican labor activity in Texas during the 1930s as well as introductory remarks by Calderón and Zamora. The slide presentation and accompanying materials have been deposited at the Chicano Studies Research Library, UCLA, for public use.

2. Prior to the beginning of the Depression in the early 1930s, the San Antonio pecan shelling industry had been mechanized. But the Depression made hand labor more profitable than mechanical labor during most of the 1930s.